

The invention in which an exclusive right is claimed is defined by the following:

1. A method for including a software resource as a participant within an online chat session conducted through a messaging service, comprising the steps of:
  - (a) registering the software resource to indicate that it is available to participate in an online chat session, when said software resource is executed;
  - (b) enabling a user to include the software resource within a list of participants in the online chat session;
  - (c) enabling a user to enter a plain language message within an online chat session user interface;
  - (d) transmitting the message to the software resource;
  - (e) parsing the plain language message received by the software resource;
  - (f) determining a plain language response to the message; and
  - (g) transmitting the plain language response from the software resource back to the user.
2. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of enabling the user to selectively direct the message to the software resource.
3. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of enabling the user to selectively add another person as a participant in the online chat session, said other person also receiving the plain language response from the software resource.
4. The method of Claim 1, wherein, if the software resource is unable to determine a plain language response to the plain language message, the response is one of a nil response and an indication that a response cannot be provided.
5. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of providing a graphic indication that the software resource is online and available to participate in the online chat session as a participant.
6. The method of Claim 1, wherein the plain language message comprises a query, and the plain language response comprises data responsive to the query.

7. The method of Claim 1, wherein, for the user, the online chat session is implemented by a messaging service program.

8. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of registering comprises the step of registering with a messaging service server through which the messaging service is implemented for all participants in the online chat session, including the software resource.

9. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of determining the plain language response includes the step of employing the software resource to search through data accessible by the software resource to find data provided in the plain language response.

10. A machine readable media having processor-executable machine instructions for performing steps (b) – (d) as recited in Claim 1.

11. A machine readable media having processor-executable machine instructions for performing steps (a) and (e) – (g) as recited in Claim 1.

12. A method for accessing information available through a software resource during a messaging service session, comprising the steps of:

- (a) indicating each participant in the messaging service session, a software resource being included as a participant;
- (b) enabling a user to enter a plain language query in the messaging service session;
- (c) transmitting the plain language query to the software resource;
- (d) parsing the plain language query at the software resource;
- (e) automatically determining information responsive to the software query, using the software resource; and
- (f) transmitting the information responsive to the software query back to the user.

13. The method of Claim 12, wherein the software resource and all other participants in the messaging service session are coupled in communication over a network.

14. The method of Claim 12, further comprising the step of enabling the user to selectively add the software resource to the messaging service session from a list of prospective participants.

15. The method of Claim 12, further comprising the step of enabling the user to selectively direct the plain language query to the software resource.

16. The method of Claim 12, wherein the software resource comprises a data manager program that accesses a store of data to find the information responsive to the plain language query transmitted from the user.

17. The method of Claim 12, further comprising the step of transmitting an indication from the software resource to the user that information responsive to the plain language query could not be provided.

18. The method of Claim 12, further comprising the step of providing an indication to a user when the software resource is unavailable to participate in a messaging service session.

19. The method of Claim 12, wherein the information provided by the software resource includes a network address at which data responsive to the query are located.

20. The method of Claim 12, wherein a plurality of software resources are included in a list of prospective participants in the messaging service session.

21. A system for enabling a software resource to respond as a conventional participant in a messaging service session implemented over a network, comprising:

(a) a messaging service server coupled to the network and programmed for implementing registration of prospective instant message participants available to be added to a messaging service session as participants;

(b) a user computing device coupled to the network and including a processor programmed to:

(i) execute a messaging service session in which a user is a participant;

(ii) add a software resource as a participant in the messaging service session; and

(iii) enable a user to enter a plain language query for information to be obtained from the software resource within the messaging service session; and

(c) a software resource computing device coupled to the network and programmed to:

(i) execute the software resource;

(ii) register the software resource with the messaging service server when the software resource is available to participate in a messaging service session;

(iii) parse a plain language query received from the user during the messaging service session;

(iv) access data with the software resource to find information responsive to the plain language query; and

(iv) transmit said information to the user computing device over the network.

22. The system of Claim 21, wherein the software resource computing device includes a data store from which the information is derived to respond to the plain language query received during the messaging service session.

23. The system of Claim 21, wherein the user computing device includes a user interface that enables a user to enter the plain language query into the messaging service session.

24. The system of Claim 21, wherein the user computing device includes a display on which the messaging service session is viewed, an image viewable during said messaging service session including an indication of whether the software resource is available to participate in the messaging service session.

25. The system of Claim 21, wherein the user computer device is programmed to enable a user to selectively add the software resource as a participant in the messaging service session.

26. Apparatus that enables a user to interact with a software resource during a messaging service session, comprising:

(a) a network interface that connects to a network over which the messaging service session is communicated;

(b) a display;

(c) a user input device;

(d) a memory in which a plurality of machine instructions are stored; and

(e) a processor coupled to the network interface, the display, the user input device, and the memory, said processor executing the machine instructions, causing the processor to carry out a plurality of functions, including:

(i) registering a user with a messaging service as being available to participate in a messaging service session;

(ii) enabling a user to add one or more participants to a messaging service session, at least one participant that is added comprising a software resource that is registered as being available to participate in the messaging service session as a participant;

(iii) enabling a user to enter a plain language query with the user input device;

(iv) transmitting the plain language query over the network to each participant in the messaging service session; and

(v) receiving a response over the network from a software resource responding to the plain language query.

27. Apparatus that enables a software resource to interact as a participant during a messaging service session, comprising:

(a) a network interface that connects to a network over which the messaging service session is communicated;

(b) a memory in which a plurality of machine instructions are stored; and

(c) a processor coupled to the network interface, and the memory, said processor executing the machine instructions, causing the processor to carry out a plurality of functions, including:

(i) registering the software resource with a messaging service as being available to participate in a messaging service session;

(ii) parsing a plain language query received from a user during a messaging service session in which the software resource has been added as a participant;

(iii) finding data responsive to the plain language query; and

(iv) transmitting the data over the network to a user who entered the plain language query.